Dyer

Single - Minded Obedience March 13, 1966 Mark 10: 17-27

The Authority of Christ adapted for - Bethany Jan 22, 1967

The story is told of a little boy who was ordered to bed by his father. But the ~~little boy,~~ (lad was a truly modern little boy ~~in his spare time, had been reading some current Biblical interpretation and some popular sermons on successful Christian living;~~) and so he reasoned thus: (" Father tells me to go to bed, but he really means that I am tired, and he does not want me to be tired. But I know that I can overcome my tiredness just as well if I go out and play. Therefore, though Father tells me to go to bed, he really means 'Go out and play.'") The logic is impeccable; granted the boy's presuppositions he is absolutely correct. And yet the little boy discovered that there was something uncompromising in his father's demand: as he was spanked he found that his Father's commands trascended logic, and that a right relationship between his father and himself depended entirely on his unconditional obedience. to his Father's authority.

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~~Now we are not overly fond of talking about a God of judgement and wrath: in fact, any thought of a God who disciplines his children is completely foreign to our casual religous approach. Apart from this however~~, we handle the uncompromising ethical demands of the New Testament in about the same way as the little boy handled his father's order to go to bed. Given just a little ~~kizzaf~~ intellectual ingenuity we find it easy to squirm out from under turning the other cheek, loving our enemy - as well as our neighbor- and all the rest of it. All that is required is the assumption that Jesus didn't really mean what he said, and that we have the innate ability to restructure his demands to correspond to our own likes and dislikes.

#2 ~~Now~~ And yet there is a real danger in ~~what I have been saying~~ taking the opposite approach. Down through the centuries many men have tried to take the teachings of Jesus at face value, and to incorporate them into a structured way of living. But it has never worked very well outside the monastery and even here the result seemed to be a clear repudiation of the spirit of the New Testament. The danger is that a too literalistic reading of Jesus' individual ethical statments will lead away from the very end he was pursuing. This has happened frequently in history - in the Spanish Inquisition: in the misguided bigamy of men who felt Jesus insistance on sharing applied even to their wives: and the pathetic piety of contemporary evangelicals fundamentalists whose love for Jesus is exceeded only by their ~~hatred for~~ intolerance toward those who disagree with them.

And so we find ourselves back where we started: asking the question - what was it that Jesus really said - and what does it mean to me? In pursuing an answer we must use logic and the tools of interpretation: and the best we can do is to be absolutely honest with ourselves - within the assumption that there is something here for us; that God's word is there if we have ears to hear it.

Therefore, back to the text for a second and more careful look at what transpired and what was said.

A man approached Jesus and asked: "Good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Luke calls him a ruler, a member of the Sanhedrin, and from what follows we know that he was a good man, a sensitive, generous, religious man. He had followed the basic moral and religious law of his people since his youth. But he was not satisfied, and he came, apparently in all sincerity, asking what more he should do. He wanted a simple answer, he wanted to be told something else to do, some other good work to accomplish that would render him the knowledge that he was saved.

When the answer came in honest simplicity he was shocked. It was quite a bit more than he had anticipated. "One thing you lack/ Go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me." At that his confident smile faded - and he walked away a sorrowful man. He came looking for a logical answer from a reputable teacher of religion - and he received what only can be described s a call to radical obedience from a teacher who spoke with a strange authority: it was either/or, yes or no - and the man went away.

Several observations are in order at this point. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, commenting on this incident, wrote: "The young man's enquiry about eternal life, is an enquiry about salvation, the only ultimate, serious question in the world." (Cost of Discipleship) In other words, the man had gotten down to the basics, the fundamental question of life: What's it all about? What does it all mean? What's in store for me? What is it that I am missing?

Put this way, or in a hundred other expressions, it is the ultimate motivation behind men's religions. Men know there is more to life than meets the eye. Men have never been able to shake the inherent notion that life does not end with death. And since time began men have answered these fundamental questions through the practice of religon.

If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that somewhere down inside us these questions are asked - and that we are answering them throughout the church of Jesus Christ - and the Christain Faith. Observation number one is academic: the man came to Jesus with a question that haunts all men, including us.

Observation number two is that his approach, his manner of asking the question was based on the assumption that there was something he could do to provide an answer. He had identified an emptiness, an incompleteness in his life, and he was assuming that it existed because he had not done enough: ~~he hadn't pulled the proper levers~~. Again the man has his counterpart in every age. Historically Christianity has always had to carry the burden of of a righteousness - reward theology. Be good - do good things and you'll get your reward in heaven. Contrary to all the other religious-ethical teaching in the world, ~~Time only permits me to say at this pojnt, that Jesus coudn't have accepted that approach for a minute.~~ Nowhere, Jesus was going in the opposite direction. For Those who aggrivated him most, those who crucified him, were precisley those who were doing the most good things. The Young man assumed that he could do something and win salvation: to a certian degree we asume the same thing and we are wrong: for the very fact of Jesus Christ points to the ppposite conclusion : the fact that we cannot provide for our own salvation no matter how hard we try.

The third observation I want to make is that Jesus' response to the man was aimed specifically at that man - and was not in any sense a universal ethical principle. He told this particular man to sell all he had, give to the poor and follow him, but he didn't tell that to everyone. He did not lay down an ultimate equation - the sure and certian way to heaven. He did encounter a particular man with a particular problem and this is the particular response he gave.

That is to say, Jesus here by-passed th e ethical question of what to do and dealt with the man as an individual. By coming in the first place, by his obvious ~~guilt and~~ anxiety the man indicate that his relationship with Godw was less than complete - something was wrong - satisfactory. Something was holding him back. ~~Obviously~~ Jesus hit the nail on the head when he indetified that something as the man's riches - because he walked away sorrowful, more anxiety ridden than he had been before. Jesus had probed to the heart of the man.

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The fourth observation is that this incident is characteristic of Jesus's relatiosnhips with the men of his day. He required one thing of all those who encountered him - and that was a decision: a decision that carried with it radical obedience. For Peter it came suddenly while he was fishing :"Drop your nets and follow me: to Matthew it came as he was sitting at his counting table: for them it was a decision to leave everything behind. For others the decision led back to their old lives, but as new men, as obedient disciples of Jesus Christ,. There was something straightforward and simple about our Lord. When men encountered him they did not sit down and discuss theology - they decided: they became his or else they rejected him.

~~To sum up briefly: a man came asking a legitimate and universally human question. He came assuming he could provide its solution. Jesus responded to him by prescribing a course of action designed specifically to meet his need. The man rejected Jesus because he was more interested in doing good things than he was obeying completely the Son of God.~~

One of the reasons this incident is so difficult to assimilate and understand is that the words decision, obedience and discipline are no longer meaningful within the context of our religious experience. It has been said, and with a great deal of truth, that the church of Jesus Christ today, is the easist, of all the institutions and organizations in our culutre. to get in and saty in. What club requires less to enter? What lodge or fraternal order require less of its members once they are in? ~~In what other organization do the members exude the the feeling that they are doing the organization a favor by belonging?~~ How long would even the most superficial service club stay in business if it did not require its members to attend meetings and pay dues? And yet, the only thing a person has to do to belong to the church is to say "I DO" to a series of questions that may or may not be taken seriously, depending on the honesty of that particular person. It is not necessary to support the church with money -or time. It is not necessary to do anything. In fact all one has to do to call himself a Christian of Presbyterian persuasion is to show up once everyt two years for the Sacrament of Holy Communion. It can be said injest, but ironic honesty, that even the Boy Scou don't put up with that. 2,000 years after Jesus wnt around calling men to radical obedience -

commanding them to drop what they were doing and follow him, we find ourselves in a culture that assumes everyone is a Christian by ~~Divine Right~~. reject both the authority + the decision and + our personal faith

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The story then ought to be always pushing us toward redefing church membership in terms of obedient discipleship. It ought to be teaching us the principle so elequently expressed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer: that a man can beleive only by obeying: that knowledge of Jesus Chris knowledge of salvation comes only when we lay our lives on the line - when we take the leap of faith and seek to be obedient to the one we know as Lord and Savior.

We are made terribly uncomfortable by this story. On the one hand we know what it means we know what it would mean if we began to take it seriously. And on the other hand we are afraid that if we did take it seriously, we might find ourselves the object of some preposterous demand - like selling all we have. We are made equally uncomfortable by the example of those who have taken the ~~obedience of discipleship~~ authority of Christ seriously. We admire on the surface an Albert Schweitzer, a Tom Dooley, a Bonhoeffer, whose sense of discipleship cost him his life at the hands of the ~~Nazis~~. We even admire, when we are honest, the fundamental courage of the man whose faith has driven him into a picket line for civil rights. But at the same time we abhor these men for their discipleship: their obedience to Jesus Christ has taken them down roads that neither we, nor anyone, want to travel. We are made uncomfortable and if we think about it long enough we are driven to despair. What's the use? I can't and won't do anything like that.

But the passage does not end with the man walking away in sorrow. His predicament prompted Jesus to remark that it was easier for a camel to negotiate the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. At this, Peter, speaking for us all, asked: "Then who can be saved?" And Jesus looked at them and said: "With man it is impossible but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

A Camel can't possibly get through the eye of a needle: A rich man, or any man , on his own efforts, cannot eneter the kingdom of heaven. Salvation is not earned nor won by the best efforts of men. Rather it is a gift, given by God, dependent on nothing but his grace and love.

And so just what did the man reject? What was it he missed? What is that you adn I miss when we ~~refuse single-minded obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ~~?

look at the authority of Jesus Christ

* This is what is at stake when a man knows the Gospel - and refuses to submit to the authority of J.C.

The man walked away from the kingdom of God that was right in front of him. He walked away from a salvation that was within his grasp - the minute that he encountered Jesus Christ This is what Christianity is all about: not a one-way ticket to a heaven that begins after death. That's God's problem: he will provide: with him all things are posssible. But a kingdo that is present now, even in our midst: a sense of salvation that exists now - even in our ow life time: a knowldge that Jesus Christ has called and claimed us, and that participating in the work of his kingdom we are doing the will of god. It begins with obedience: with putting our lives on the line: it becomes real when we say in effect: "take my life, take my doubting faith take my efforts, my will , my all: It begins when we obey the call of Jesus Christ: by ~~taking the risk of single-minded obedience~~ when we acknowledge his as the ultimate authority in our lives.

Shortly before he made the decision the ultimately cost him his life, Bonhoffer wrote movingly about ~~decision and discipleship~~ discipleship & the authority of Christ. ~~In that, this sermon has depended heavily on his thinking I close with his words:~~

" Only the man who follows the commands of Jesus single-mindedly, and unresistingly lets his yoke rest upon him, finds his burden easy and under its gentle pressure receives the powe to persevere in the right way. The command of Jesus is hard, unutterably hard, for those who try to resist it. But for those who willingly submit, the yoke is easy and the burden is ligh The commandment of Jesus is not a sort of Spiritual shock treatment. Jesus asks nothing of us without giving us the strength to perform it. His commandment never seeks to destroy life, but to foster, strengthen and heal it." (P31 Cost of Discipleship)

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May God grant us ~~grace~~ to persevere: ~~may~~ he grant us the Faith and courage ~~to~~ to respond to him - in single - minded obediance.

~~Amen~~